

Iowa's Strategies & Actions to Address Youth Transition, Permanency, & Disparate Outcomes for Children & Families of Color

From the Iowa here are examples of five different strategies related youth transition, permanency, and addressing disproportionality.

- I.** Engaging Youth In Their Own Planning And Decision-Making
- II.** Re-Considering The Roles Of Birth Parents/Families In Planning With Youth
- III.** Teaming
- IV.** Court Partnerships
- V.** Addressing Disproportionality & Disparate Outcomes for Children of Color

These dynamic strategies and results are due to a committed partnership for youth between the Iowa Department of Human Services, legislature, courts, providers, schools, families, the youth, and other key stakeholders.

I. Engaging Youth In Their Own Planning And Decision-Making

Elevate™: elevate™ is a group of young people between the ages of 13 and 21, most of which are either currently in foster care or are foster care alumni. Their goal is to inspire others to new levels of understanding & compassion to the life connection needs of foster care & adoptive teens by sharing their personal stories of hope. The program is the result of collaboration between Children & Families of Iowa, the Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS), and the Iowa Legislature. Originally formed in 2005 with DHS' adoption incentive monies, *elevate™* was first developed to enhance recruitment of more foster and adoptive homes for teens. As the group grew and more teens became involved, it was apparent that there was a need for an active voice for foster/adoptive children. *elevate™* became this voice, and it has since become a force of change and education in Iowa's Child Welfare system. Since January 2007 *elevate™* has made great strides in its goals on a local and state level—developing chapters in 8 cities, with plans to add 4 additional chapters within the year.

Youth participate in *elevate™* in a number of ways, including doing poetry, writing rap songs and creating art. Much of the art created by *elevate™* youth is gets statewide attention as part of the traveling exhibit, "Art Spoken." In addition, *elevate™* youth write their stories for the *elevate™* web site. *elevate™* youth also participate in advocacy and speaking engagements, increasing opportunities to get involved and inspire their local communities. Due in part to the *elevate™* advocacy, two bills were passed this year by Iowa lawmakers. The bills affected youth contact with their siblings and education money for youth that age out of foster care.

One of the most important roles *elevate™* plays is advocating for youth to child welfare decision-makers by telling their stories and sharing their experiences with the system. *elevate™* provides youth representation for Department workgroups, and has developed training curriculums for professionals, foster parents, youth and the general public. *elevate™* members present at all DHS Supervisor staff and new worker trainings, as well as new foster/adoptive parent training. *elevate™* has also produced DVD's focused on the court and legal issues, as well as educational issues for children in foster care.

elevate™ Website: http://elevate2inspire.com/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1

Iowa After Care Services: Iowa's Aftercare Program, serves former foster care youth between the ages of 18 and 21, and focuses on education, housing, employment, health care, access to essential documents, basic day-to-day living skills, transportation, access to community resources, and permanency as key components of a youth's self-sufficiency plan. Emphasis is placed on assuring positive personal relationships with adults in the community linking youth to a mentor. Permanency is one of several outcomes the Aftercare contractor is required to report on.

Preparation for Adult Living [PAL]: Aftercare participants who left foster care after May 1, 2006 that are at least age 18, and have a high school diploma or GED may be able to qualify for a monthly stipend to live in an approved living arrangement such as former foster parents, in an apartment or a college dorm. PAL participants must be attending college, be in a work training program or be working. Regular meetings with Self Sufficiency Advocates are required.

Post-Secondary Education & Training Assistance: Tuition, books and other related expenses may be covered by the federally funded Education and Training Voucher (ETV) or through the state-funded All Iowa Opportunity Foster Care Grant program – both administered by the Iowa College Student Aid Commission. College Aid is exploring on campus programs that enhance existing student services by connecting students with on campus mentors, tutors, and faculty and staff in addition to peer support.

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative: Iowa is currently participating in the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. Polk County (Des Moines and surrounding suburbs) is the project site and the Youth Policy Institute of Iowa administers the initiative. An *elevate*TM subcommittee serves as the youth advisory group for the initiative. DHS and Youth Policy Institute are currently working on a plan for sustainability and statewide expansion through our Community Partnership sites (see next item).

Community Partnership Transitioning Youth Initiative: DHS has provided 3 Community Partnership for Protecting Children (CPPC) sites with small, one-year grants to implement collaborative efforts designed to increase partnerships and integrate services and resources to improve outcomes among youth over the age of 16 who are involved in or who have aged out of Iowa's child welfare foster care system. Grant initiative highlights include: a youth-centered thinking and planning approach; the recruitment of youth into community leadership roles (coordinated with *elevate*TM); life-skills training centered on financial literacy; the involvement of immigration and culturally specific services; and an intense focus on assisting youth to build life-long connections and achieve permanency. Sites receive training and technical assistance for implementing Circle of Friends, an individualized approach to support youth in planning for transition.

Shared Youth Vision: Iowa has received a grant from the Department of Labor to pilot collaborative community efforts to address the needs of system-involved youth. The shared youth vision team is working with public-private coalitions in 2 counties, to implement strategies to increase partnerships, build capacity, and integrate services and resources to improve outcomes among youth ages 14 to 21 who are involved in or who have aged out of Iowa's Child Welfare/Juvenile Justice system -- including improving and integrating strategies and services to prepare system-involved youth for adulthood with efforts to connect these youth with permanent, positive relationships.

II. Re-Considering The Roles Of Birth Parents/Families In Planning With Youth

Family Team Meetings/Circles of Support: As part of DHS' Better Results for Kids (BR4K) redesign and CFSR PIP, DHS has worked to strengthen family engagement, including use of family team meetings as a way to engage parents and youth in identifying family strengths and needs in order to achieve child safety and permanency. Children and youth are encouraged to participate in family team meetings. When they are unable to attend, they are encouraged to participate through an advocate or through correspondence.

DHS is currently working with the Center for the Study of Social Policy to implement Circles of Support; a type of family team meeting that focuses on connections for youth, youth permanency, and transition plans to adulthood within several Community Partnership for Protecting Children sites, with the ultimate goal of statewide implementation.

Family Finding and Connections: DHS piloted "Family Finding and Connections" in the 2 of DHS 8 Service Areas to locate and engage relatives/kin who will provide a life-long connection with, and who may serve as potential permanent placement resources for children in foster care that were identified by DHS staff from a list of children with a permanency goal of "another planned permanent living arrangement" or children with termination of parental rights that had been waiting for adoption. The pilot served 31 children; the average age was 13.6 years, although 7 of the youth were close to aging out at the time of the project. The project was able to increase family connections for 29 of the 31 children that participated in the pilot. DHS received the final report on the project in early November 2007, and will be working to develop a plan to sustain and expand the program.

Child Welfare Service Contracts: DHS recently made significant changes in child welfare service contracts, including:

- Inclusion of outcome measures focused on safety and permanency outcomes, including incentive payments for outcome achievement.
- Increased flexibility for contractors to provide services and supports based on child/family needs related to safety and permanency, regardless of whether the child is living at home or placed in foster care
- Increased expectations for group care providers to engage in age-appropriate activities to maintain a child's connection to the child's family and community, to promote reunification or other permanent placement, and to facilitate a child's transition to adulthood.

III. Teaming

Child Welfare Stakeholder Panel [DHS & Court]: As noted above, DHS has entered into a contract with an external organization to provide support to the Child Welfare Stakeholder Panel. This contractor is also responsible for recruiting and supporting tribal members' participation on the panel.

DHS Staff Training Grant: National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice (NRCFCP)/University of Iowa School of Social Work and DHS recently implemented a three-year project, funded by the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Through the project, the National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice developed and is providing training to DHS child welfare supervisors, transition planning specialists and child welfare caseworkers on knowledge and skills for improving child welfare practice with older youth in care toward better outcomes for youth who age out of care. In particular, the training focused on:

- Infusing positive youth development into case planning with older youth
- Culturally competent practice with older youth in care, looking especially at issues of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity
- Maintaining permanent connections and reconnecting youth to permanent connections
- Connecting youth to resources during the transition process
- Achieving successful transitions for older special needs youth

The NRCFCP also training supervisors on their role in improving outcomes for youth in transition, and will be facilitating community conversations on improving transition and permanency outcomes for youth in foster care. The grant includes an extensive evaluation.

Foster and Adoptive Parent Training: DHS has contracted with the Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association (IFAPA) to offer statewide training on effective transition planning for adolescents in foster care. The class trains foster and adoptive parents how to administer the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment to youth in their care and teaches skills for transition to adulthood. In conjunction with this training, DHS contracted with IFAPA to deliver training to foster and adoptive parents on "Permanency for Teens." IFAPA also provides additional training related to permanency, including "Lifelong Connections: Permanency for Older Youth" and "My Brother, My Sister: Sibling Relationships in Adoption and Foster Care".

Resource Family Retention and Recruitment: DHS recently made changes in our contract for statewide resource family recruitment and retention. Specific recruiting for individual children will improve recruiting of committed resource families for older youth. The contract also has increased emphasis on recruitment of a diverse set of resource families that better represent the racial, ethnic and cultural profile of the children in foster care.

IV. Court Partnerships

Children's Justice Initiative (CJI): The Children's Justice Initiative, established by the Chief Justice of Iowa's Supreme Court, "is dedicated to improving the lives and future prospects of children who pass through Iowa's dependency courts." The CJI Advisory Committee has arranged for several youth panels to speak at Judicial conferences; panel members have repeatedly raised the issue of wanting to participate in court hearings about their case. As a result, Judges in several districts now expect/require that guardians-ad-litem (GALs) prepare and encourage youth to participate in court.

"We have an obligation to ensure their childhood is rooted in a safe and permanent family so they can develop the wings to carry them into a productive and happy childhood."

Iowa Chief Justice Marsha Ternus

CJI goals include:

- Approving the recommendations of the Pew Commission on Foster Care (on 9-10-07, the Iowa Supreme Court passed a resolution adopting the recommendations in concept and pledging to implement the recommendations in Iowa).
- Assigning top priority status to child dependency cases for the entire Judicial branch and making decisions on that basis.
- Studying for adoption national court performance outcome measures.
- Supporting the Chief Justice in efforts to collaborate with executive and legislative branches of government in efforts to protect children and promote their well-being.
- Providing leadership in efforts to educate Judges and court personnel who handle child welfare cases, including joint training with DHS.

DHS recently contracted with an external organization to provide support to parent and youth members of the stakeholder panel that advises DHS and the Court on the state's Title IV-B Child Welfare Plan, the CFSR, and Court Improvement Project plan. As a result, we now have 5 youth who are active members of the stakeholder panel. Through the contract, youth are sponsored by an adult member of the panel who serves as a mentor; the contractor also provides special orientations and preparation to the youth as well as follow-up support after each meeting.

As part of the CJI, the Supreme Court has implemented "One Family, One Judge" across the state, and has established interdisciplinary teams in each Judicial District and a Children's Justice Cabinet at the state level to address cross-agency issues that affect dependency cases. The court has also hosted web casts from Chapin Hall, University of Chicago on Youth Permanency to which stakeholder have been invited.

CJI Website: http://www.judicial.state.ia.us/Administration/Programs/Childrens_Justice/index.asp

V. Address Disproportionality & Disparate Outcomes for Children and Families of Color

Work in Polk County/Des Moines: Polk County, Iowa's largest and most urban county, was selected in March 2004 to be one of DHS' 2 Minority Youth and Family Initiative (MYFI) sites. Subsequently, Des Moines was selected to participate in the Casey Family Programs' Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Reducing Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes for Children and Families of Color in the Child Welfare System. Following is a summary of the activities that DHS staff and community members have engaged in to address the disproportionality of African American children and families within Iowa's child welfare system.

- ***Undoing Racism Training.*** During FY 2007, DHS sponsored 6 sessions of Undoing Racism training facilitated by the People's Institute for survival and beyond. Participants are 50% DHS staff and 50% community members. An additional 6 sessions are scheduled during FY 2008. Des Moines also holds Study Circles every Friday that focus on addressing racism and disproportionality. The Study Circles provide a forum for having "courageous conversations" around racism and disproportionality, as well as identify changes that staff can make in their work to improve outcomes for children and families of color.
- ***Culturally Competent Family Team Meetings.*** DHS has contracted with Visiting Health Services (VHS) to provide culturally competent family team meetings for African American families. VHS significantly increased the number of African American FTM facilitators.
- ***Community Engagement.*** Polk County DHS has established a Community Shared Decision making group that guides their work related to CPPC and disproportionality, as well as their work around responsible fatherhood. Community members have noted a real change in the community's perception of DHS over the last several years, including a building sense that DHS is open to community input and partnership and that DHS really wants to help families. DHS is also working closely with Des Moines Public School, which is also working to address their overrepresentation of children of color in suspensions and special education.
- ***Parent Partners.*** Polk County is one of 4 sites within Iowa piloting Parent Partners, a parent mentoring program where parents that have successfully had their children reunited with them provide support to families that have recently had their children placed into foster care in order to improve family reunification possibilities. Parent Partners is playing a major role in the community's efforts to address disproportionality and to improve DHS engagement of fathers. Elevate™ has also played a major role in developing the county's Parent Partners program. In July 2007, DHS worked with Parent Partners and Elevate™ and other community partners to sponsor the first annual Family Reunification celebration, which was attended by families, Judges, DHS staff, providers, the County Attorney's office and others.
- ***Pre-Removal Conferences.*** Polk County now holds conferences/family team meetings prior to removal or within 24 hours of emergency removals. The meeting brings together family members, extended family, informal supports and DHS staff to identify the best possible placement for the child (ideally with a relative), to begin development of the family reunification plan and to set up initial parent-child visits. Results have included increased use of relative/kin placements, more stable placements, and increased use of informal supports. Families have also voiced having greater clarity of what is expected of them, and a sense that the professionals recognized their strengths and their plan truly reflected their needs.
- ***Child Welfare-Income Maintenance (IM) Coordination.*** Des Moines is testing several PDSA's around cross training of child welfare and IM staff through staff "Lunch and Learns", as well as including IM staff in pre-removal conferences to help families and relative caregivers apply for any benefits that might be available to them (e.g., Medicaid, food assistance).

- ***Parent Representation in the Courtroom.*** A Polk County Judge has initiated an examination of the adequacy of parent representation in the courtroom, as well as strategies to improve parent representation.
- ***Model Court.*** As a result of one of the Polk County Judges involvement in Des Moines BSC work, the Polk County Model Court added a goal related to understanding and addressing over-representation and disparate outcomes for children of color being served in the child welfare and Juvenile Court systems, as part of their Model Court Goals for 2007.
- ***Hair Care.*** Based on the suggestion of the youth member of Des Moines' BSC team, the county has provided education and hair care kits for foster parents and other providers regarding the needs of African American children in care.
- ***24-Hour Check Back.*** Also based on the suggestion of the youth member of Des Moines' BSC team, social workers now visit children the day after they are removed from their home to provide information, check how they are doing, answer questions, and make sure they have what they need from home.
- ***Staff Hiring.*** DHS now includes questions on poverty, cultural competence and disproportionality as part of interviewing applicants.

Work in Woodbury County/Sioux City: According to the National Center for Health Statistics, nearly one-third of all Native American children in Iowa reside in Woodbury County. There are 32 tribes represented, with the largest populations being associated with the Omaha, Santee Sioux, Winnebago-Nebraska, Yankton Sioux and Rosebud Sioux tribes. In March 2004, Woodbury County was selected to be the second of DHS' 2 Minority Youth and Family Initiative (MYFI) sites. DHS partnered with the Community Initiative for Native Children and Families (CINCF) to develop their MYFI strategies. Subsequently, the Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity in Child Welfare selected the MYFI collaboration in Woodbury County as a program to which they would lend technical and financial support. Following is a summary of the activities that DHS staff and community members, with the assistance of the Alliance, have engaged in to address the disproportionality of Native American children and families within Iowa's child welfare system.

- ***Collaboration.*** Collaboration has been the key to many significant efforts being made to address the over-representation of Native American children and families in the child welfare system in Woodbury County. Through ongoing dialogue, DHS and the Native American community found common ground to begin addressing the issue. In addition to DHS and CINCF, other partners have included the DMC Resource Center at the University of Iowa School of Social Work, the local police department and local hospitals and other service providers.
- ***Native American Unit.*** DHS established a Specialized Native American unit of child welfare staff to provide services to Native American children and families. This unit functions as a team that handles family services, child protective services and adoptions. The unit focuses on two critical decision points, placements and reunifications. DHS also hired two Native American liaisons to be part of the unit – one works as a liaison with the tribes and the other works as a liaison with individual families, helping them to meet agency and court dates and in obtaining the resources that they need. The Native American community has credited the unit and the 2 liaisons with making significant improvements in services to Native American children and families. The unit has been successful in arranging community services and diverting families from having to enter the formal child welfare/juvenile court system, as well as in significantly increasing the number of relative placements for children that do have to be removed from their birth parents' home.
- ***Training.*** DHS and CINCF have provided numerous trainings for child welfare staff, court personnel, providers, attorneys and other stakeholders regarding the federal and state Indian

Child Welfare Act and native culture. Nationally recognized speaker, Judge Thorne, has presented several times. The Alliance also provided *Undoing Racism* training for key leaders. DHS and CINCF also sponsored an Elected Officials Forum.

- ***Cultural Opportunities.*** The MYFI project has sponsored numerous opportunities for Native American children that have been adopted by Caucasian families or that are in Caucasian foster families to experience Native American cultural traditions.
- ***ICWA Reviews.*** DHS and CINCF have conducted an ICWA compliance review, as well as a Native American focused quality service review (QSR). The QSR conducted recently identified numerous improvements since the initiation of the MYFI work.
- ***Reconciliation.*** Recently, the Alliance sponsored a Truth, Healing and Reconciliation forum involving people from DHS, the community, providers, law enforcement, court, legal, medical, etc.

Disproportionate Minority Contact Resource Center: DHS has contracted with the DMC Resource Center at the University of Iowa/National Resource Center on Family Centered Practice to provide statewide technical assistance and training related to disproportionality and disparate outcomes for children and families of color. The DMC Resource Center works to address disproportionality and disparate outcomes across multiple systems, including child welfare, juvenile justice and education. DMC Resource Center staff has helped DHS analyze child welfare data on disproportionality, including key decision points across the life of the case; and have provided TA and evaluation for the two MYFI project sites. The DMC Resource Center also sponsors an annual conference on disproportionality that includes sessions specifically related to disproportionality, as well as an emphasis on wraparound to develop highly individualized service plans and empower families and communities.

Elevate™: Elevate™ has identified issues related to cultural diversity and disproportionality as part of their strategic plan for next year. Strategies include recruiting minority youth to participate in elevate™ chapters, addressing the disproportionate number of children/youth of color in the foster care system, diversity training for all facilitators, and development of a sub-committee on minority recruitment and involvement. Elevate™ will also speak at the annual DMC Resource Center conference on Disproportionality.

Community Partnership for Protecting Children: DHS contracts with the Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence to provide cultural competency training to CPPC sites. This has been one of the most popular training offerings, and has been widely utilized.

Contract Language: DHS child welfare contracts and RFP's now include language regarding cultural competence, staff diversity, and addressing disproportionality.

Children's Justice Initiative (CJI): The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and CJI Director, and the DHS Director and Child Welfare Director meet regularly with tribal leaders to ensure the issues and needs of the Tribes are included in the CJI work.

Governor's Office Meetings with Native Americans: The Governor's Office recently initiated an effort to meet periodically with Native Americans to discuss issues of concern, including child welfare.

Governor's Executive Order: The Governor recently issued an Executive Order designed to increase the diversity of state staff.